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PREVIEW

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**Hamilton Fish Sr. and the politics of American nationalism,
1912-1945**

Troncone, Anthony C., Ph.D.

Rutgers The State University of New Jersey - New Brunswick, 1993

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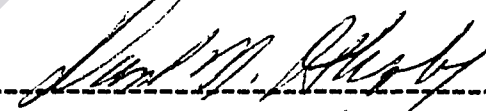
HAMILTON FISH SR. AND
THE POLITICS OF AMERICAN NATIONALISM, 1912-1945


BY ANTHONY TRONCONE


A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School-New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Program in History
Written under the direction of
Professor William O'Neill

and approved by









New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 1993

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION (Ph.D.)

Hamilton Fish Sr. and
the Politics of American Nationalism, 1912- 1945

by ANTHONY C. TRONCONE

Dissertation Director:

Professor William O'Neill

This dissertation is about Hamilton Fish Sr. (1888-1991), the scion of a eminent New York Republican political family, who served in the United States Congress from 1920 to 1945. An admirer and friend of Theodore Roosevelt, in 1913 Fish bolted the Republican party, and as a Bull Moose Progressive won a seat in the New York State Assembly. In 1917, after serving three one-year terms in the legislature, he helped organize the African-American 15th New York regiment, which served with distinction in the France during World War I. As one of the regiment's commanding officers, Fish was decorated for bravery in combat.

Upon his return to the United States, Fish helped organize the ultra-patriotic veterans organization, the American Legion. In 1920 he was elected to Congress and in 1921 introduced legislation on behalf of the Legion to create the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Fish gained national prominence in 1930 when he chaired the first congressional investigation of Communism. During the 1930s he became a fierce critic of President Roosevelt and the New Deal and the leading isolationist in the House. Once the United States entered World War II, he came under increasing attack from Democrats and Republicans, and in 1944, his district gerrymandered, he was defeated for reelection.

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I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the following people and the staffs of archives and libraries for the help and kindness they extended to me over the course of nine years. The staff at the American Jewish Historical Association at Brandeis University; Jean Holliday of Princeton's Mudd Library; the archivists at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; the staff at the New York Public Library; Tom Hull, former director of the American Legion Archives, and his very helpful associates; the archivists at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa; the Hoover Institute, Palo Alto, California; the Library of Congress; Zionist Archives, New York, NY; and Rutgers University's Alexander Library- all directed me to key collections and provided me with a great deal of assistance.

I want to extend special thanks to Joan Wing, Rutland, Vermont for providing me with a genealogical history of the Fish family and to professors John Gillis and Richard L. McCormick (Rutgers University) for their gentle but steady guidance. I owe a special debt to two very good friends, Kurt Piehler and Danny Burnstein (Rutgers University), for sharing with me their keen insights into contemporary American history and helping me locate needed manuscripts. Lydia Fish and Joann Mecca also provided a great deal of assistance at key points during the writing of this dissertation.

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Someone whose friendship and many kindnesses I will always hold dear is professor Donald Riachle (Kean College), who proof read many drafts and pointed me in new directions.

Of all the support that I received, that of my dissertation adviser, William O'Neill, was immeasurable. For a period of over eight years he provided much kindness, showed considerable patience in reading numerous drafts and offered needed encouragement and support during some trying times.

The one person without whom this dissertation could not have been written was Hamilton Fish. I met him in 1984 while I was doing research on a seminar paper about Armistice Day. Before long we became friends, and I decided to write my dissertation about him. However, what began as a work of love in time turned into an extremely painful undertaking. I liked him and am very appreciative for his having consented to years of taped interviews, and for providing access to many of his personal papers. Once I began to examine the thousands of pages of documents and compared what they revealed to what Fish had written and recounted to me during interviews, I realized that there were major discrepancies. It became very clear that Fish's memory, which was nothing short of remarkable until his death, was selective and self-serving. All too often he would shade facts or evade them altogether in order to malign the one person who had become an obsession to him: Franklin D.

Roosevelt.

My only consolation is that I have attempted to be fair to Hamilton
Fish as well as to the truth.

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Abbreviations

EP, Albert Einstein Papers
AFP, America First Papers
ACLUP, American Civil Liberties Union Papers
AFLP, American Federation of Labor Papers
AJHA, BU, American Jewish Historical Association, Brandeis University
AL, American Legion
CR, Congressional Record
FFFP, Fight For Freedom Papers
FP, Hamilton Fish Papers
LFP, Louis Forestal Papers
HHP, HHL, Herbert Hoover Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library
JD, FOIA, Justice Department, Freedom of Information Act
NA, National Archives
NAACP, LC, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Library of Congress
NCFP, NYPL, National Civic Federation Papers, New York Public Library
LP, NYMA, Fiorello La Guardia Papers, New York City Municipal Archives
NYHT, New York Herald Tribune
FDRL, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library
VP, George Vierick Papers
WP, Washington Post
WAW, LC, William Allen White, Library of Congress

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The scion of a prominent Republican political family, Hamilton Fish served in Congress from 1920 until 1945, representing New York's 26th congressional district located in the heart of the Hudson Valley. During the 1930s he gained national prominence as a fierce enemy of Communism and as a bitter opponent of President Franklin Roosevelt's domestic and foreign policies.

As a Bull Moose Progressive, Fish entered politics in 1914, winning a seat in the New York State Assembly. In 1915 he joined forces with other Progressives, including his friend, former president Theodore Roosevelt, in championing military preparedness for possible American intervention in World War I. During this same period, he worked to secure the Republican presidential nomination for Roosevelt. When that effort failed, he returned to the GOP. In 1917, after failing to win an officer's commission in the Army, he applied for and received one as a captain in the 15th New York National Guard regiment, comprised of black soldiers and commanded by white officers. Sent to France in January 1918, the regiment, now the 369th U.S. Army, was assigned to the French Fourth Army. The 369th remained in the trenches for 191 days and saw heavy combat at the battles of Champagne Marne and the Meuse Argonne. Fish himself received the Croix de Geurre and the Silver Star for gallantry in action. In 1919 he returned to the United States and along with other prominent officers helped establish the American Legion. A year later he was elected to Congress.

Almost as soon as he entered the House of Representatives, Fish introduced legislation on behalf of the American Legion to construct the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. For the remainder of the decade he devoted his efforts to military disarmament, veterans affairs, and introducing sundry legislation on behalf of his

constituents.

In 1930 he chaired the first House committee to investigate Communism or more specifically, Communist propaganda. Politically ambitious, eyeing a Senate seat or perhaps a vice-presidential nomination in 1932, he thought that the considerable publicity generated by nation-wide hearings might thrust him into the spotlight. Another, more complex, reason was rooted in ideology. The Bolshevik seizure of power, the subsequent attack on property, and the dictatorship of the proletariat presented to Fish as well as to many others a frightening image of a society run amok. Like many who had expressed concerns about the nature of American capitalism, Fish had visited the Soviet Union in the early 1920s to learn if the Bolsheviks had in fact discovered the way to a better world. Thoroughly disgusted with what he saw, he returned to the United States convinced that the Soviet experiment had failed.

Despite his committee's failure to prove that the Soviet Union was involved in domestic subversion, Fish created a precedent for subsequent Communist investigations conducted by the House of Representatives. He also pioneered many of the methods used by later red hunters, contributed to bringing the fusion of nativism with anticommunism into the political mainstream, and helped make internationalism a political dirty word.

When Franklin Roosevelt became president, Fish accused him of harboring dictatorial ambitions and branded the New Deal the brainchild of proCommunists and socialists. Though not indifferent to the enormous suffering experienced by many during the depression, he remained hostile to most New Deal programs on the grounds they tended to enlarge executive, and weaken congressional, power.

Beginning in 1935 Fish became the leading isolationist in the House of Representatives, using his position as the ranking Republican member of both the House Foreign Affairs and Rules Committees to obstruct every measure aimed at enlarging Roosevelt's discretionary control over foreign policy. Between 1935 and 1940 he supported a variety of arms embargo,

neutrality, and war referendum legislation. Once war broke out in Europe, he formed the National Committee to Keep America Out of War and became a prominent spokesman for the isolationist America First. In 1941 he sought to block American military assistance to Great Britain by leading the opposition in the House to the Lend Lease bill. Careless in his associations, he collaborated with a number of far right antiwar activists such as Father Charles Coughlin, William Dudley Pelley, Gerald K. Smith, Edward Smythe, and Gerald Winrod. Fish would later pay a price when, like many of the aforementioned, he was targeted for prosecution under the Alien and Sedition Act for allegedly working as a Nazi agent. This charge was never proved.

The war years found Fish under increasing attack from political opponents who claimed his prewar opposition to the administration's defense policies had undermined American military preparedness. Sensitive to this charge, he pledged total support to the war effort, although he remained a vituperative critic of the administration. In addition to the legions of enemies he made among Democrats, a number of powerful GOP officials grew uncomfortable with him. In 1944 Governor Thomas Dewey, seeing Fish as an embarrassment to the party, orchestrated the gerrymandering of Fish's district and as a result, Fish suffered a narrow defeat in his bid for reelection that year. His political career ended, Fish dedicated the rest of his life to championing the cause of nuclear disarmament, denouncing the twin evils of internationalism and Communism, and writing a series of polemical books bashing Franklin Roosevelt and all things associated with him. On January 19, 1991, soon after completing his memoir, Fish died at his home in Cold Spring, New York. He was 102.

The Fish family traces its ancestry in this country back to 1635 when Jonathan Fish and a number of political and religious dissenters arrived in Massachusetts, where they founded the settlement of Sandwich. Twenty years later Fish and many of the other settlers apparently grew tired of

trying to accommodate themselves to the Puritans and left for New York where they settled in Newtown, now Bayside.¹

Succeeding generations of Jonathan Fish's male descendants prospered in real estate and attained some level of political success. The family achieved its greatest prominence, however, through Nicholas Fish. Born in 1758, Nicholas was trained as a lawyer and in 1777 at the age of nineteen was commissioned the youngest major in the Continental Army. He gained fame for the valor he displayed during a number of battles. He also formed influential political and social connections. By the end of the Revolution, he had cemented ties with prominent Federalists such as Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and others. Perhaps because of them he converted to the Episcopalian faith.²

After the Revolution, Nicholas married Elizabeth Stuyvesant, a direct descendant of Peter Stuyvesant. Through this marriage, Fish enlarged his wealth and expanded his network of social connections. Appointed a Supervisor of Revenue by George Washington at the end of the Revolution, which allowed him to accumulate vast tracts of land in New York, Fish was fairly wealthy in his own right. But he was not content to restrict himself to the life of a prosperous land baron.³ During the 1790s and early 1800s, Nicholas Fish entered New York State politics. His political aspirations were cut short when his close friend, Alexander Hamilton, was killed in a duel with Aaron Burr in 1801. Fish had tied his political career to that of Hamilton's; his death coincided with the end of the Federalist period and the rise of the Jeffersonians.⁴

It would be left to Nicholas's son Hamilton, named in honor of Alexander Hamilton, to realize his father's ambitions. Born in 1808 in lower Manhattan, Hamilton Fish was groomed for a political career. He succeeded in becoming a congressman, governor of and senator from New York and during the Grant administration, Secretary of State for eight years. It was in this office that Fish achieved his greatest prominence, earning a reputation as one of the few competent and honest members of one of the

most corrupt administrations in the nation's history.⁵

Not noted for his intellectual skills, Fish was, however, regarded as an honest, hardworking public official. In fact, he was conscious of the fact that his greatest asset was his reputation as a dignified, upper class gentlemen. Writing to his son, Stuyvesant, Hamilton Fish reminded him to "Let truth and honesty continue ever to be the aim and the principle of every act of your life."⁶

Detracting from Fish's personality was his pugnacious sense of self-righteousness. Fish's subordinates in the State Department often found themselves pitted in bitter quarrels with him as he stubbornly insisted having his own way. On one occasion his obstinacy nearly provoked Russia into severing relations with the United States.⁷

Like his father Nicholas, Hamilton Fish married well. In 1836, he wed Julia Kean, the daughter of a wealthy New Jersey political family. This union eventually produced seven children, four girls and three boys. In 1846 Nicholas, the first son, was born; three years later Julia gave birth to another son, named Hamilton. Of the three boys, it was only Hamilton who sought a political career. His two brothers became successful in business and law. After graduating from Columbia College in 1869, Hamilton worked for two years in Washington as his father's secretary. He then returned to Columbia where he took a law degree. Following a two year political apprenticeship working for New York's Governor Dix, Fish ran successfully for the New York State Assembly in 1873. He remained there for a total of twelve terms.⁸

Like his father, Hamilton Fish II was stubborn to the core and equally self-righteous. These traits sparked a bitter clash with Thomas Platt during the 1880s when Fish rebelled against Platt's domination of the party. Representing a rural and primarily agricultural district, Fish felt that farmers were being denied equal access to the centers of power and sought to use this to his political advantage.⁹

During the 1890s he created a small but powerful political machine in

Putnam County. Nonetheless, he was careful not to go too far in challenging Platt. In 1895 he was selected as Speaker of the Assembly after he promised Platt that he was "with the machine now." According to Hamilton Fish III, his father's rapprochement with Platt involved no sacrifice of his father's ethics. It was nothing more than two politicians making a political horsetrade. Fish III may be right, because two years later Platt had Fish replaced as Speaker with S. Fred Nixon, a man more to Platt's liking, and in 1898 blocked Fish's attempt to get the Republican gubernatorial nomination.¹⁰

Giving meaning to the adage that alliances are temporary, interests are permanent, Fish switched his political allegiance to Theodore Roosevelt in the late 1890s. In 1896, the year of Fish's pact with Platt, Roosevelt had written that he wished Fish "were not both treacherous and unscrupulous." The politically ambitious Roosevelt, also having entered into an uneasy political alliance with Platt, recognized that Fish was a major Republican power in Putnam County. As president, Roosevelt, setting aside personal reservations, rewarded Fish by appointing him Assistant Treasurer for New York City in 1903.¹¹

Almost twenty-five years earlier Fish had married Emily Mann, maintaining the Fish's family tradition of marrying well. Although not as politically prominent as the Fishes, the Manns could count among their ancestors Thomas Hooker, a Puritan and one of the religious founders of Connecticut. Emily Mann's family was among New York's social elite and politically prominent in the Albany-Troy area.¹²

Their marriage was, like his father's, a good one. The few surviving letters between them suggest that he was very attached to Emily. On her part, she was a good political wife, dutiful and supportive of her husband's career. She also gave him four children, all girls, though it was a male child that Hamilton wanted to carry on the family name. In 1888 she became pregnant again, raising her husband's hopes.¹³

Emily Fish's pregnancy was a difficult one. Hamilton worried that it

was endangering his wife's health, which had become precarious. On the morning of December 7th she went into labor. By 9 o'clock that night, when she had failed to deliver her child, the two attending physicians, Dr. Murdock and Dr. Partridger began to prepare for a Cesarean delivery, without the use of anesthetic. Two hours later the operation was completed, and she gave birth to a boy. Although extremely concerned for Emily, Fish was nonetheless ecstatic. Writing to his father that night, he proudly noted that although his newborn son had "no good looks," he was the "long looked for boy."¹⁴

Not surprisingly, the infant was named Hamilton, and he became the center of his father's attention. There was never any doubt that he was destined for a political career. Even as a toddler, he was brought to the Assembly where his father allowed him to crawl down the aisles.¹⁵

The elder Fish was not wealthy. Years of political service had kept him from earning the vast sums his brothers had in law and in business. He had inherited a respectable amount of money when his father, Hamilton Fish I, died in 1893. But the estate had to be divided among a large number of children and grandchildren, reducing the value of each's share. Still, Hamilton Fish II and his family lived comfortably in a large two story house in Garrison, about a mile from Hamilton I's house at Glenclyffe. Surrounded by the rugged splendor of the Hudson Valley, young Hamilton grew up with uncommon advantages. A live-in German woman doubled as a cook-housekeeper and private tutor, providing him with lessons in German culture and history.¹⁶

The only male sibling, Fish fled to the outdoors to escape what he described as the endless torments of his sisters. During the cold winter months he went ice-skating and sleigh-riding. Summers were spent at Newport, Rhode Island where his aunt, Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish reigned over society's elite. At Newport Fish socialized with a large network of family and friends.¹⁷

In 1896 the Fish family left the United States for Switzerland where

his father enrolled him in the prestigious Chateau de Lancy boarding school near Geneva that the elder Fish had attended when he was a boy. Here young Hamilton received a classical education, studying Greek and Latin texts. And it was here that he developed a strong affinity for sports, particularly soccer. Only eight years old, but strong for his age, he was blessed with natural athletic ability and exhibited signs of what eventually would become an extremely aggressive personality. He reveled in athletic competitiveness, much to the concern of his doting father who feared for the well being of his son.¹⁸

The elder Fish was waging a losing battle. The boy was stubborn to a fault. And the father spoiled him, caving in to virtually all of his son's many demands and becoming imprisoned emotionally by his love for him. Apparently, Hamilton Sr. resigned himself to the fact that males growing up during this period were expected to subscribe to certain ideals of masculine behavior.¹⁹ Football, especially in the Ivy League, was fast becoming the sport that best exemplified manly behavior. No one admired the game more than Theodore Roosevelt, himself a former gridiron player at Harvard, who asserted that football led to the development of "in-reared manliness." The young Hamilton Fish by now idolized TR and accepted as articles of faith his notions of masculinity. It was Roosevelt who symbolized the spirit of fierce nationalism at the time Fish was an adolescent. Growing up in an atmosphere charged with political electricity, he used the Rough Rider as a role model. Moreover, in 1898 Fish's cousin, also named Hamilton Fish, while serving with the colonel in Cuba, had been slain in the battle of San Juan Hill.²⁰

As a teenager Fish began displaying signs of recklessness. In 1900, while he was on vacation with his family in Bavaria, he insisted on climbing the steep Zutzspitzer mountain. His father initially refused to grant him permission but as usual acceded to his demands. With the help of a guide his father hired, Fish climbed the mountain in a single day. A few years later, while at the reins of a horse drawn buggy

he nearly killed himself, his father, his sister Rosalind, and Margaret Roosevelt. According to a news report about the incident, Fish was driving the buggy at a "good clip" when it tipped over rounding a curve in the road. Although everyone was thrown out of the carriage, no one suffered serious injury.²¹

Fish's mother had died in 1899 after a lengthy illness, bringing Fish even closer to his father. Fish later said that one of the reasons for the extraordinary closeness that he had with his father was their shared identities. "I was him," Fish explained. For the next three decades, Fish and his father would correspond almost daily.²²

What is striking in virtually every letter he wrote to his father are the almost endless demands Fish made on him. Paragraph after paragraph was prefaced by the pronoun, I. Rarely did Fish express an interest in his father's health or in any of his father's activities, with the exception of what he was doing politically.²³

Fish's relationship with his sisters worsened after their mother's death. He seethed with anger at their attempts to discipline him and what he said was their incessant taunting. On one occasion he reacted to his sister Rosalind's teasing by gripping her neck with his powerful hands and attempting to strangle her. A tragedy was prevented when he was pulled off her by his cousin, William Rogers, whose wife Fish would later marry. Fortunately for both Fish and his sisters, he was away at school for most of his childhood.²⁴

In 1901 Fish entered St. Marks, a noted preparatory school in Massachusetts. As a student, he compiled a mediocre academic record but fared well in debating, a skill he was later noted for when he entered politics, but he struggled in his other subjects. Now thirteen years old, tall and muscular, his attention was directed toward sports, particularly football.²⁵

By the time he graduated from St. Marks in 1905, his gridiron skills had attracted the attention of Harvard and Yale. Mindful that Theodore

1. Stuyvesant Fish, The Fish Family (Privately Published, 1942) pp. 4-5; Fish family genealogy, New York Historical Society.
2. Ibid, pp. 6-76; Nicholas Fish commission, FP; Hamilton Fish, New York: Battleground of the Revolutionary War (New York: Vantage Press 1976) p. 181-183.
3. Stuyvesant Fish, The Fish Family.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.; Allan Nevins, Hamilton Fish: The Inner History of the Grant Administration (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1936).
6. Nevins; Stuyvesant Fish, pp. 163-164.
7. Nevins.
8. Ibid.; Interview with Hamilton Fish, 4 April 1987, New York, NY.
9. Richard L. McCormick, From Realignment to Reform: Political Change in New York State, 1893-1990 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) p. 80; HF interview, 4 April 1987.
10. McCormick, p. 81; HF interview, 4 April 1987.
11. TR to Alice Roosevelt Cowles, 1896 Roosevelt Papers; HF Sr. appointment, 1903, FP.
12. Stuyvesant Fish, The Fish Family.
13. HF interview, 4 April 1987.
14. Hamilton Fish II to Hamilton Fish I, 7 December 1888, FP.
15. HF interview, 4 April 1987.
16. HF interview, 4 April 1987; Fish family financial records, FP.
17. HF interview, 4 April 1987; Cleveland Amory, Who Killed Society? (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960) p. 320.
18. HF interview, 4 April 1987; Hamilton Fish, Memoir of an American Patriot (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1991) pp. 12-13.
19. HF interview 4 April 1987; John Watterson, "Inventing Modern Football," American Heritage, September-October 1988.

Roosevelt had attended Harvard and that his son Theodore Jr. was now attending it, Fish chose Harvard. Influencing Fish's choice, too, was that the school's football team was being rebuilt and that he might play a major role in it.²⁶

In September 1905 Fish entered Harvard. He fit in easily, joining the exclusive Porcellian and Signet clubs, and elected president of the Hasty Pudding Club. He was careful to insure that everything he did would enhance his prospects for later political success. The Porcellian in particular was of great importance to his social acceptability. Membership in it was one of the highest honors a Harvard student could receive.²⁷

Fish majored in political economy. Though not a serious student, he maintained a high B average. One of his favorite professors was Albert Bushnell Hart, a historian and an unabashed admirer of Theodore Roosevelt. Hart heightened Fish's appreciation for Rooseveltian progressivism. Despite this, Fish's primary interest in education was utilitarian. He viewed college not as a means to broaden his intellect but as a necessary prerequisite to his political career. And it was primarily his body, not his mind, that he had come to Harvard to exercise.²⁸

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20. NYT, 27 June 1898; Edmund Morris, The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt (New York: Coward, McCann, Geoghegan, 1979) p. 643.
21. Manhattan Press Clipping, 21 August 1905, FP.
22. HF interview, 4 April 1987.
23. HF I to HF II, various dates, FP; Hamilton Fish, Memoir, pp. 13-14.
24. HF interview, 4 April 1987.
25. Ibid.; Fish, Memoir, pp. 12-14.
26. HF interview, 4 April 1987.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.

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